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AstraZeneca Facing Two London Lawsuits Over COVID Vaccines + More

The Defender's COVID NewsWatch provides a roundup of the latest headlines related to the SARS CoV-2 virus, including its origins and COVID vaccines. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.

By The Defender Staff

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AstraZeneca Facing Two London Lawsuits Over COVID Vaccines

Reuters reported:

AstraZeneca (AZN.L) is facing two London lawsuits, including one from the husband of a woman who died after receiving the Anglo-Swedish drugmaker's COVID-19 vaccine, in the first of potentially dozens of cases brought in England.

Britain was the first country to roll out the at-cost AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine in early 2021, although it later restricted the use of it among under-40s due to the small risk of blood clots.

Anish Tailor, whose wife Alpa died in March 2021 after receiving her first dose of the vaccine, filed a product liability claim against AstraZeneca at London's High Court on Aug. 4, according to court records.

His lawyer Peter Todd, from the law firm Scott-Moncrieff & Associates, told Reuters that he has nearly 50 other clients who will formally sue AstraZeneca in the coming months.

AstraZeneca is facing a similar lawsuit from Jamie Scott, who was diagnosed with vaccine-induced thrombotic thrombocytopenia, which can cause fatal blood clotting, after receiving the AstraZeneca vaccine.

U.S. CDC Says New COVID Lineage Could Cause Infections in Vaccinated Individuals

Reuters reported:

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Wednesday the new BA.2.86 lineage of coronavirus may be more capable than older variants in causing infection in people who have previously had COVID-19 or who have received vaccines.

CDC said it was too soon to know whether this might cause more severe illness compared with previous variants. Due to the high number of mutations detected in this lineage, there was concern about its impact on immunity from vaccines and previous infections, the agency said.

Scientists are keeping an eye on the BA.2.86 lineage because it has 36 mutations that distinguish it from the currently dominant XBB.1.5 variant, CDC, however, said virus samples are not yet broadly available for more reliable laboratory testing of antibodies.

The agency had earlier this month said it was tracking the highly mutated BA.2.86 lineage, which has been detected in the United States, Denmark and Israel.

HHS Awards $1.4 Billion in Grants to Develop Future COVID Tools

The Hill reported:

The Biden administration on Tuesday announced it is awarding $1.4 billion in grants through its coronavirus initiative to fund the development of "a new generation of tools and technologies to protect against COVID-19 for years to come."

Through the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response (ASPR), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) awarded the grants to a collection of pharmaceutical companies, nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations. Part of the funding aims to develop longer-lasting coronavirus vaccines.

The awards are part of Project NextGen, an initiative led by ASPR that fosters public-private partnerships to develop the next generation of COVID-19 countermeasures. These are the first grants to be issued from NextGen, which has an initial investment of $5 billion. Officials said Tuesday they currently don't anticipate the need for additional funds.

The bulk of the grants — $1 billion — was awarded to four clinical trial partners of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority. These partners are ICON Government and Public Health Solutions Inc., Pharm-Olam LLC, Technical Resources International Inc., and Rho Federal Systems Inc.

Another $326 million was awarded to Regeneron for the development of a monoclonal antibody to prevent COVID-19 infections. Regeneron developed the monoclonal antibody known as REGEN-COV during the early parts of the pandemic, at one point being the only treatment available for the virus. The efficacy of Regeneron's first antibody diminished as newer variants arose. Johnson & Johnson Innovation was granted $10 million for its Blue Knight competition, which focuses on next-generation technologies that enhance preparedness for future infectious disease threats.

Construction, Food Preparation Workers More Likely to Die From Overdoses During Pandemic: CDC Data

The Hill reported:

Construction and food preparation workers were more likely than those in other professions to die from overdoses during the COVID-19 pandemic, new data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows.

Researchers from the CDC found that among different industries, drug overdose death rates were highest in construction and extraction and food preparation in 2020. The researchers analyzed fatal drug overdose data from 46 states and New York City, largely focusing on different industries and occupations.

Construction had the highest drug overdose death rate across all the industries studied, with nearly 131 deaths per 100,000 workers. Accommodation and food services followed, with about 99 deaths per 100,000 workers.

The report noted those who sustained injuries while working and used prescription opioids were more likely to overdose.

COVID, a Disease With Tricks up Its Sleeve, Hasn't Fallen Into a Seasonal Pattern — Yet

STAT News reported:

To most people on the planet, the COVID-19 pandemic is over. But for many scientists who have been tracking the largest global infectious disease event in the era of molecular biology, there is still a step that the virus must take it. SARS-CoV-2, hasn't yet taken. It has not fallen into a predictable seasonal pattern of the type most respiratory pathogens follow.

Influenza strikes — at least in temperate climates — in the winter months, with activity often peaking in January or February. It's the same with RSV, that was also true for RSV — respiratory syncytial virus — and a number of other bugs that inflict cold- and flu-like illnesses. Some respiratory pathogens seem to prefer fall or spring. Even measles, when that disease circulated widely, had a seasonality in our part of the world, typically striking in late winter or early spring.

To be sure, you can contract these viruses at any time of the year. But transmission takes off during a particular pathogen's season. (The COVID pandemic knocked a number of these bugs out of their regular orbits, though they may be heading back to more normal transmission patterns. The next few months should be telling.)

What You Need to Know About BA.2.86, a New 'Highly Mutated' COVID Variant

TODAY reported:

A new, highly mutated COVID-19 variant called BA.2.86 has been detected in several countries, including the United States.

Health officials and scientists are closely monitoring the variant, and research is underway to determine whether it could pose a greater threat, though there's no need to panic yet, experts say.

Last week, the World Health Organization and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that they were tracking BA.2.86, which has a large number of mutations compared to other COVID variants circulating.

BA.2.86, which some experts have nicknamed "Pirola" on social media, was first detected in late July and since then it has caused fewer than 200 infections worldwide. It appears to have descended from the Omicron BA.2 sublineage, which caused surges of the virus in 2022, Dr. Andrew Pekosz, a virologist at Johns Hopkins University, tells TODAY.com.

20% of Vaccinated Transplant Recipients Got COVID Amid Omicron, but Only 8% Severely

CIDRAP reported:

COVID-19 infections among 2,400 vaccinated transplant recipients were common (19.7%) during SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant predominance in the United States, but only 7.5% needed hospitalization, estimates a study published late last week in JAMA Network Open.

Researchers at New York University and Johns Hopkins University surveyed participants in a national cohort who reported receiving at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose from January 2021 through December 2022. The team sent follow-up surveys in January and June 2022.

Among 2,461 transplant recipients, 19.7% reported a COVID-19 infection, including 15 reinfections. The case incidence per 1 million person-days was 90 before the Delta variant era (January to May 2021), 304 during Delta (June to December 2021), 1,292 during Omicron BA.1 (April to March 2022), and 1,051 during BA.2 (April to June 2022), and 1,066 amid BA.4, BA.5, and BQ.1 (July to December 2022).

Among 464 infected participants, 7.5% were hospitalized. Hospitalized participants more often reported receiving stronger immunosuppressive regimens (56.8% vs. 36.5%) and lung transplants (24.3% vs. 9.5%). Hospitalization rates per 100 infections ranged from 14.1 pre-Delta to 2.3 amid BA.2.

U.K. Posts Initial COVID BA.2.86 Risk Assessment

CIDRAP reported:

The U.K. Health Security Agency (HSA) recently posted an initial risk assessment of the BA.2.86 Omicron subvariant, which said the rapid appearance in multiple countries in people without travel histories suggests established international transmission.

The newly identified variant has many genetic mutations and is distant from BA.2, its likely ancestor, and currently circulating XBB variants. The similarity of the sequences so far — six samples from four countries — suggests relatively recent emergence and rapid growth, but the HSA said it has low confidence in that assessment, pending the examination of further sequences.

Though predictions of the combined effect of such a large number of mutations would be unreliable now, there is enough information to expect antigenic change. The HSA also said there are mutations in the spike protein that may be associated with changes in other viral properties.

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